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## FRIENDS BY MAIL

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OLIVE ELY HART

South Philadelphia High School for Girls, Philadelphia

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A Red Cross exhibit had been set up in one of the rooms of the building where I was teaching. I was told that the Junior Red Cross was anxious to encourage correspondence between American children and children in other parts of the world. So I wandered into the room to see whether there were any possibilities in the exhibit for my summer-school classes.

The cases were on one side of the room between two large windows. I felt my inborn dread of school exhibits disappearing as my eye fell on the clean glass filled with gaily colored, whimsically constructed toys; on well-mounted photographs, clearly typed letters, and beautifully printed cards of explanation.

I stopped first to read a central card which stated that the children who had sent the material were pupils in Dr. Bakule's school for crippled children at Prague. The card explained that these children were striving to live and learn so well, not only that they might do their own part in the world, but that they might encourage other children to do their work well. "To life through life, and to work through work" was their motto. Then I saw the photographs. Fine lads with faces glowing with intelligence, but with bodies crushed and crippled and broken as God has seen fit to afflict but few of us. But the triumph on those faces no one could see without knowing that somewhere, somehow, a great victory had been fought and won by these children.

The letters—the autobiographies—were the answer. Each child had written his life-story as only children can write. They all had known poverty, pain, hunger, despair, but had found sanctuary in Dr. Bakule's school. There they had found a home, for the school had developed into a community house where they shared with each other good times and bad, and where each worked out his own salvation in terms of finding his work.

The toys happened to be materializations of "The Elephant's Child." I am sure Kipling would have reveled in the "great gray-green greasy Limpopo River" painted scene-fashion on a canvas background; in the many-jointed Bi-colored Python Rock Snake: in the elephant's child himself, in his tall aunt the giraffe, and in the Kokokolo bird. One boy, a cartoonist of promise, had contributed also delectable cartoons of each one in the school including the good Dr. Bakule and the mother of one of the children who stays at the school and "helps."

These children craved the friendship of American children and asked for answers to their letters. I wanted to sit down and write at once myself. My problem, however, was to choose the one of my classes which would get the most from the experience, get it most quickly, and get it so obviously that a hundred or so observers would be able to catch the idea of the whole proceeding.

I decided that a group of tenth-year boys and girls should be the ones to see the exhibit and write to Dr. Bakule's children. I decided also that I would let the whole idea come to them, as it had to me, through the charm and power of the children's own messages. I aroused considerable excitement in class, therefore, by asking whether everyone could meet me the next morning an hour before their first class. Columbia students are accustomed to early hours, and the pupils in the Demonstration School are quite willing to begin betimes. Early the next morning therefore, I unlocked the door and ushered some bewildered children into the exhibition room. "There is something here I should like you to see," I said. They looked slightly disappointed at my *dénouement*, but like me they were quickly attracted by the cases at the windows.

I sat down in a far corner and looked over a book I had with me. In a few minutes I heard one girl say, "O! can't you read it so that we can all hear?" It was a letter from one boy telling of his prayers that God would send him arms and his despair when he found that his prayer was unanswered. The girl began to read:

But miracles no longer happen in our century. I began to hate even life. I thought and thought, but the result of it was only sadness. . . . But I appeared one nice day in Prague at the institute for cripples. The days which now began in my life were as beautiful as in fairy tales. Only now I began to live.

I worked with all energy because when I was working I had at least no time to think of the things which made me unhappy before, and I knew too that I could be independent and no burden to anyone only by means of work. . . . In the evenings I had to go out and run, run somewhere, no matter where, only to run. If the pain comes again I shall smile at it and shall keep more closely at my work.

"He's wonderful, isn't he?" someone murmured. Then the reading continued. "Listen to this. Here's another interesting one."

My aim which I should like to reach is to study caricature and illustration. The only thing I am afraid of is of not being constant in my aims. Maybe I am so because I create very easily.

"Doesn't that sound just like a book?" came from one girl. Then they turned to me and I came out of my corner.

"Miss H——, what is this? Who are these children? How did these things get here?" I called their attention to the cards and then told them that the Junior Red Cross had decided to continue to work for the children of the world. I explained that the idea was to make it possible for the young people of today to get better acquainted with one another, in the hope that when they grew up and had to take our places, better understanding would help to solve some of the problems of the world.

"Do you mean that we may write to them? May we send them something?" "It is time to go up to class," said I, "shall we take time there to discuss what we can do about writing?" There was an excited chorus of "Yes."

When we reached the third floor, our room was crowded with visitors—summer-school students who were there to observe. The opportunity was too good to be lost. Of course the children were eager to tell the visitors where they had been and what they had seen. It took very little guidance to have them tell, in addition, what had impressed them most, and what they intended to do about the whole matter. It was a great opportunity to think straight and to express ideas so definitely and so effectively that the visitors would catch something of the real flavor of the visit. The reaction on the part of the observers seemed to show that the children were successful in their attempts.

Plans for writing were eagerly made. It was decided that each one should write a letter; that we should give each other an idea of what we intended to say to avoid duplication; that we should include kodak pictures of the class, of the school and university buildings, and any other interesting pictures taken by the pupils themselves.

The class met the next day, and interest was as keen as it had been before. True to their promise several pupils had brought cameras with them. Brief statements of the general contents of each letter were made. Discussion as to what should be put in and what left out was intelligent and discriminating. One committee was appointed to revise all the letters; another was selected to assemble all the material; one member of the class agreed to type all the letters. Each one agreed to keep in mind the fact that he was to tell the children at Prague something which would open the door a little bit to the beginnings of a friendship with some American children. We parted to make drafts of the letters for the next day, and to meet after school to take pictures.

The letters came the next day, were read in class, and subjected to the most penetrating criticisms. When Janet said she was taking a Domestic Arts course but that she didn't like it, Ted objected: "I don't think she ought to say that, Miss H——."

"Why not?" I asked.

"It may have a bad effect on Dr. Bakule's girl," said he. "She seems to like the course."

"Oh, no," said Janet, "I don't think so, I said '*unlike* her I don't like it.' People don't all like the same thing. The course is all right, I guess."

Charlotte, who had been raised in a Hebrew Shelter for Destitute Children, broke down over her letter. She told me privately afterward that she felt glad those children could know that she could understand them because she had had trouble herself. "But," she added, "I couldn't read about it out loud."

Ted, who was inclined to be self-centered and silent, went to a great deal of trouble to get pictures he had taken of Niagara Falls. "I thought the fellow who was interested in mechanics would like to hear about the water power," he explained.

The letters were finally written and typed and the photographs mounted. The thing was done—a slight thing, but electric with the vitality of the desire which had created it. A few extracts from the letters may give something of the spirit of friendly understanding which made writing them such a pleasure.

Janet wrote:

. . . . . At present I am going to school in New York. Like your Sylvia I study Domestic Science, but unlike her I don't like it. . . . . For the past two years I have been living in New York, but after I graduate I am going to India for six months, so perhaps we may meet in some of my travels.

Charlotte seemed to find real comfort in writing her sad little history to children who had sent her a message of indomitable courage.

. . . . . When I was five years old my mother died and left behind her a large family of small children. My father was ill; so an older sister and I were put into an institution. I was separated from my sister and brother, and put to board with an old woman. Two years later my father died, and I felt that there was nothing left for me to care about. The institution thought it would be good for me to be with my brother and sister. I went there, but not for long, for I became ill and had to be sent away from my sister again, and I never returned.

My life among different classes of people I will not try to describe, because I am trying to forget those experiences. I am getting older, but I miss my mother more and more. When I think of you and your wonderful will-power, I feel how very insignificant my troubles were. I have been thinking only of myself, not others. Now I think I shall have new power to do something that is worth while.

Helen, herself a cripple, wrote:

. . . . . There are some schools here for crippled children who have parents and who live at home. These schools are run by hospitals which give treatment to the children and educate them at the same time. A vehicle calls for each child and takes them all directly to the school. These children are taught things similar to those taught to you. I think if you were in America you would like the arrangement of things.

Elizabeth had been caught by the garden pictures in the exhibit:

. . . . . I noticed that some of you were very interested in gardening. We also have a garden. It is not very large, but we raise many vegetables. We have some you don't have—corn, tomatoes, and lima beans. My father and aunt do most of the gardening, but sometimes I help. I like to eat what comes out of it better than working in a garden.

Ted wrote:

I have read your letters and have seen the work you sent over here. I was surprised to learn that you, away across the sea, should think, act, and live so much as we do.

There are many thousands of schools and colleges in this country, and there are more opportunities for boys and girls to learn a profession. I am going to high school now in New York, but I have to travel forty miles to get there. I am going to be an electrical and constructional engineer.

I have a friend who hasn't any parents and who is having a hard time to get an education. He goes to college every other year, as he has to work one year between so he can earn his next year's expenses.

If it is possible our class would like to correspond with you as we are interested in your activities in Russia.

Pauline's letter I give in full:

MY DEAR FRIENDS:

Although I have never seen you nor met any of you, I cannot help thinking of you as friends whom I admire. Could anybody feel differently toward you after having read your autobiographies and seen your pictures?

One thing I can tell you, my friends, which I am sure will please you: the aim of Dr. Bakule's school to "help and inspire normal children" is a thing of reality. Would you like to have proof of it? Here in our English period, which was devoted entirely to you, one of the students said that our efforts and achievements seem very insignificant when compared with yours. Yes, we are proud of your brave struggles and inspired by your victories.

I wish to add one thing more before closing my letter. I am in this country three years and nine months, I came over from Russian Poland on December 18, 1916, and I like it here very much. May success never fail you is the wish of your American friend,

PAULINE . . . .

Do you think these children will ever again hear unmoved the words "Czecho-Slovakia?" Do you think their own schools can ever again be detached in their minds from other schools in other lands where other children are living and learning and growing up? Do you think that when these children grow up they can ever quite forget that their hands once touched across the sea in friendliness and understanding?

Motivation? Yes. Purposeful planning? Yes. A resulting product? Yes. An unforgettable impression? Yes. Should we not be grateful for teaching opportunities which make vital, purposeful activity almost inevitable?